

## **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

### **SELF GUIDED TOUR OF PUBLIC AREAS OF MAIN INTERIOR BUILDING**

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Interior Secretary Harold Ickes had envisioned the design and construction of a headquarters for the Department of the Interior as a symbol of their plans for the Nation. At the Dedication ceremony held on April 16, 1936, President Roosevelt referred to the building as “symbolical of the Nation’s vast resources” and the “cornerstone of a conservation policy that will guarantee the richness of their heritage.” Ickes saw it as a “symbol of a new day.” This building was the first government building to be designed and constructed as part of the New Deal.

Ickes worked with local architect Waddy Wood to design and construct the building. Ickes’ official portrait in the Secretary’s suite today shows him with the preliminary plans of the building. He ensured that symbolism is the overarching theme of the building beginning with its exterior. While the building gives a nod to the classical tradition of architecture, its style is an updated version that ties it to the modern world. Its size is monumental, and though it was constructed in only 18 months, inconceivable today, it occupies two whole city blocks. Its colossal pilasters and pillars emphasize monumental scale rather than relate the size of the building to the individual. It was meant to emphasize a new “heroic age of government,” and every aspect of the building tells this story.

The building demonstrated how to provide the best working environment for its inhabitants. It was one of the first Federal buildings to be designed with central air conditioning and escalators. It also contained amenities that were designed to make the work environment a nurturing place for Interior employees: gymnasium, art gallery, and even an employee soda shop in the penthouse. The 2,200 offices were designed to provide space, light, comfort, and utility.

The art in the building was considered integral to its design. One percent of the total cost of the building was set aside for art (approximately \$127,000 in Depression era dollars). President Roosevelt initiated the concept of “1% for Art” to help artists get commissions during the Depression and it is still a viable and an active part of urban and public architecture today. Fabulous floor to ceiling murals were commissioned for each floor of the building and for main gathering areas as well. Many of these works can be seen by the public without prior arrangements. These murals were created to give the employees a sense of the value of their work and to exhibit the activities of each bureau for all to see.

Ickes wanted to encourage the ongoing creation of indigenous art. To that end, he included a shop in the building where arts and crafts from living Indian artists would be sold. The Indian Craft Shop on the first floor provides employees and visitors with a venue to see high quality work by some of the best Indian artists, while offering an opportunity to view three stellar murals by two of the most well known Indian artists: Alan Houser and Gerald Nailor. Houser’s “Breaking Camp at Wartime” and “Buffalo Hunt” show his great style in depicting scenes from the life of the Apache people. “Deer Stalking” by Nailor shows his taste for integrating traditional Navajo sand painting techniques into his intimate scenes of the Navajo world.

A visit to the Cafeteria which is in the basement of the building gives visitors an opportunity to view the murals and display cases surrounding the Central Grand Staircase on the First Floor and Basement levels. On the First Floor are the four murals by Millard Sheets: "The Negro's Contribution in the Social and Cultural Development of America: The Arts, Education, Religion and Science". These works display the Interior Department's role in affirming civil rights and administering nationwide education, and present the efforts of Ickes to advance the lives of African Americans. On the Basement level to the right of the entry door to the Cafeteria is the famous mural by Mitchell Jamieson "An Incident in Contemporary American Life", depicting Marian Anderson's concert at the Lincoln Memorial which was organized by Ickes and Mrs. Roosevelt after Marion Anderson was denied permission to sing at DAR Constitution Hall for being black. Inside the Cafeteria visitors can enjoy a meal while viewing the monumental murals "The Harvest Dance" by James Auchiah and "The Ceremonial Dance" by Steven Mopope. Both artists are Kiowa Indians from Oklahoma and their work exhibits the stylization and pattern common to murals created by Indian artists in the 1930's.

Ickes required that a museum be integral to the building to provide a venue to show the public the work of the Department of the Interior and for the employees to see the work of other bureaus. The goal of the Interior Museum remains to interpret the mission and work of the Department of the Interior. While the museum now has temporary changing exhibitions, some of the original exhibits of the museum remain. In particular, the most popular artifacts are the dioramas. The designers of the dioramas, who were on the staff of the National Park Service, did everything in their power to assure the accuracy of the depictions of the diorama. In one diorama which depicts the Hoover dam, they went so far as dispatch a staff member to sketch the dam to determine the shadow cast by the dam during the day. Everything in this museum was designed to show museum exhibitions as a science and an art. Today, the Museum maintains a mixture of its original 1930s exhibitions with updated exhibitions as well. Each bureau is represented, and the Museum seeks to tell the Interior Department's story as an ongoing saga.

The public is invited to visit the Interior Museum, the Indian Craft Shop and the Interior Cafeteria Monday through Friday 8:30 to 4:30 (The Cafeteria closes at 3:00 pm daily). The visitor entrance is at 1849 C Street, NW. The Shop and Museum are also both open on the third Saturday of each month. Admission is always free, however, each adult must have photo identification. Photography is not permitted in the building without prior approval. For a complete tour of the building, and the dozens of murals, paintings and sculptures (including other work by Alan Houser and Gerald Nailor, work by Maynard Dixon, Gifford Beal, William Gropper and others) please make an appointment with the staff and try to contact them at least a week before your visit to ensure that there will be a guide available. Contact 202-208-4659.